

“Sproing!”
Eri Makino
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George Mason High School
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Grades 9-12
English
Time Requirement: 1-2 class periods

Summary

Told from the first person point of view of a modern Japanese woman, “Sproing!” by Eri Makino, brings feminism to the forefront to highlight the “sham of the Japanese male” (Birnbaum 48). The reader becomes a fly on the wall to the narrator’s frank conversation with a friend who has dropped by. Written as a monologue (stream of consciousness), the conversation drifts through complaints about children and their neediness, marriage and the forcefulness of husbands, violence in love, the terror of meeting the in-laws, happiness in childbirth, and the music of Elvis Presley, which all lead to a discovery of what it means to be a modern woman. She is a “disaffected housewife who finds salvation in Elvis” (Snyder 274) and in the process finds herself. The prevailing tone of the piece is one of tension and impending “hysteria, leaving the impression that at any moment – sproing!—she is going to snap” (Loughman 406).

Historical/Literary Context

The Japanese state, which has had a significant empire in Asia from the late nineteenth century onward, has encountered strong pressure from other nations (namely China) to be honest about war results, give in to border disputes, avoid economic crisis, and control its people (Mitter 17). Japan as a nation seems to be sentenced to an eternity of trying to discover its place in the ever-changing world. Mitter writes that since the war ended in the mid 1900s, “there is certainly a more self-confident air among many Japanese [...] who feel that the country needs to move on from the long post-war period, and find a new, more assertive role” in the world (Mitter 20). Determining what this new role will be has proven to be a bit of a challenge.

The struggles of the nation become the struggles of the people on a smaller scale. Japanese women have struggled for centuries to find their place in society and in the world. From the days of traditional *kakimami* (courtly love), through the modern, more Western ideas of love, women have had to adapt quietly to the changing times, often at the expense of men. However, the 1980’s brought legal equality to the women of Japan through the EEOL (Equal Opportunity Law). Japan lacked a “conventional feminist movement” but did make progress quietly through such legal action (Miller 163). In such works as “Sproing!”, authors serve up “slices of verbal sushi that bite back” (Snyder 271).

Eri Makino, author of “Sproing!”, writes for a generation of “young, ‘hip,’ and supremely salable” writers and readers (Snyder 272), being very frank and honest about her feelings toward men and the world. She evokes a “‘world-as-seen’ rather than ‘world-as-felt’” (Snyder 273) voice with language that is “utterly graphic” in its criticism of masculinity and femininity (Snyder 274). Through brute honesty about her view of the world, Makino creates a “remarkably real character gamely battling her deadening surroundings, and perhaps winning” (Snyder 274). Celeste Loughman writes of “Sproing!”, “People are lonesome, lonely things. They just cover it up somehow” (Loughman 406). The women of Japan as represented in “Sproing!” have been quiet, but it is now their time to rise up. The story leaves the reader with a “lingering modernism” (Snyder 274), making the reader deal with questions about “war, guilt, love, and the possibility of sanity in an insane world” (Snyder 275).

“Sproing!” was first published in 1987.

Discussion Questions and Answers for “Sproing!” by Eri Makino

(Note: More “in-depth” questions about East Asia and Feminist Criticism have been included in the Appendix materials)

1. What is a “kuroko”?
“A shadow behind the scenes” (Birnbaum 29). In traditional bunraku puppet theater, a kuroko is an assistant puppeteer clad in black often with black fabric covering the face. The term is also used in kabuki and noh theater for similarly clothed stagehands.
2. What ideas justify the speaker’s self-proclamation of being a “kuroko?” Do you agree or disagree that the speaker is a “kuroko?” Why?
She says, “I’m the type people don’t notice” (Birnbaum 29). She thinks that everyone overlooks her—when she’s sneaking beers at the Parents’ social, when trying to stand up to her husband/mother/mother-in-law/children. This may be true at the beginning, but I don’t think she really is a kuroko. She may allow herself to be pushed around in the beginning of the story, but by the end she stands up and pushes back. Elvis “saves” her and she allows herself to become noticed.
3. In her interactions with her son at the beginning of the story, what makes her feel guilty?
She feels guilty because she’s “too busy to listen to the kid” (Birnbaum 30). He wants to chat about a drawing he made at school, yet she pushes him off. She’s typing, she’s drunk, and she doesn’t want to chat about something so meaningless to her. She begins to feel guilty for pushing him off. This is another example of her not allowing herself a moment to be herself.
4. Why does she not feel well at the beginning of the story?
She’s been drinking beer at Parents’ Day, her son is annoying her with worries about a meaningless drawing that is lost, she’s easily irritated, etc. She says, “Sure enough, my stomach is shot, and now my head’s going too” (Birnbaum 30). Later she says, “‘Mommy’s got a tummy ache, okay?’ By then it really hurts, so I take something for it. But ‘stead of getting better, it only gets worse” (Birnbaum 31).
5. What does the husband do for dinner that really surprises her?
She is asleep on the futon, so her husband orders Chinese food for dinner (Birnbaum 32). She notes that he also takes care of the dishes and that this is the first time this has ever happened. Perhaps this is a result of talking about divorce a few days prior? Perhaps her husband has turned a corner after she starts standing up for herself?
6. What reason does she give for why she liked working at her office? Given historical events in 1980’s Japan, does this seem realistic? Why or why not?
“Well, me, I liked the place ‘cause men and women got equal pay. Fact is, I entered the company telling everybody, ‘I’ll be here till they make me president’” (Birnbaum 32). I believe this seems realistic to the time period. Please read the following article:

JAPANESE WOMEN WORKING AROUND THE LAW

Robbi Louise Miller

Japan is not renowned for the muscle flexed by its feminist movement. Although legal protections for women do exist, the stereotype of the subservient geisha dominates Japanese women's international image, and fringe feminist activity has been sporadic at best. In fact, the Japanese media has a history of mocking the more radical women's movements.

Despite the absence of a conventional feminist movement, women have made progress in the area of employment, partially due to the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL). Although the issue of women's employment has received a great deal of attention in the context of anti-discrimination law, with many in-depth studies analyzing both the EEOL's potency and its inadequacy, to date the law has not been placed within a meaningful social context. In order to evaluate the law's potential for spurring social change, it must be examined not in a vacuum, but within the framework of women's lifestyle choices.

Contrary to international perceptions of Japanese women, many social indices point to the conclusion that women in Japan are quietly revolting. In an economy that depends on their disposable labor, women are silently voting with their actions. Social phenomena documented by the press reflect that Japanese women are marrying later, having fewer children, and focusing their energies away from the traditional labor market. This Article posits that women's failure to act in a traditional way is a direct response to the specific obstacles that Japanese women face in the job market.

7. When she just started seeing a guy, what was her intention with him?
She says, "I just wanted to have a little fling" (Birnbaum 32). "Me, I didn't want to get married. Been choosier if I had. All I wanted was a little fling, so I took what I could get" (Birnbaum 33).
8. List a few of the man's irritating qualities (as described by the woman). What does this say about the sort of woman she is?
He yells. He guarded the door after work and waited outside for her (Birnbaum 33). She's clearly a strong and independent woman. She doesn't want to be waited on or helped.
9. When she puts her foot down and says the relationship is over and she doesn't want to marry, what's the man's reaction? Is this a reasonable reaction? Why or why not?
He whips out a knife and threatens to kill her and then himself. He locks her in a room then exits to use the restroom. She escapes. He chases her down and comes back the next day as if nothing ever happened (Birnbaum 33). This is NOT a reasonable reaction. It's difficult to understand how this is allowed to happen without her calling the police or standing up for herself.

10. Note that the woman does not call the police during or after this incident. What Feminist criticism may be at work here?

She prefers to operate independently of those around her, but doesn't call for help when her life seems to be at stake. There's independence and then there's having a life in danger. I believe this instance crossed the line of a safe encounter and a reasonable reaction. Feminists may applaud her for doing it on her own, but he came back the next day, so her reaction was not effective. If a man is stalking her, authorities should be informed.

11. "Kakimami" is the traditional Japanese version of courtly love—where the man falls in love with the woman through stolen glimpses of the woman. This story approaches love through a different method. Determine what the Feminist criticism may be of the love displayed in this story (Does the modern world accommodate the traditional vision of kakimami?).

The love in this story is forceful, animalistic, and scary. The man keeps pursuing the woman even while she tries to push him further away. In kakimami, love is formed on the idea or assumption of what might be there when two finally get together. It is about exchanging love letters, catching glimpses, and slowly becoming lovers. In this story, there is nothing left unknown. The man and woman interact intensely and forcefully. Instead of clandestine visits, the man forces his way into her life. A feminist critique would say that courtly love is unrealistic and that to win real love, force must be used. I would also comment that the woman in this story needs to act with more force to establish her love. Women may dream of courtly love (or kakimami), but it is not likely to happen in a world where men and women begin to play on equal fields—in jobs, in money, etc. The modern world does not accommodate kakimami.

12. Describe the woman's relationship with her mother. Cite a few lines that make you feel this way.

She dislikes her mother. Her mother makes decisions about the daughter's well-being without any concern for her daughter. For example: she invites the man in who abused the daughter the previous night (Birnbaum 35) and praises his upbringing—college, appearances, cheerful disposition, proposal of marriage. The mother doesn't see what the daughter sees when in private with the man.

13. Identify one simile and one metaphor the author uses to describe marriage on page 36.

Simile: "And like some kinda bad dream, married life begins" (Birnbaum 36).

Metaphor: "Might as well be a slave. Marriage is just one big slave trade, anyway" (Birnbaum 36).

14. What inference can you make about the narrator and her interest in alcohol? Cite a line from the story to support your point.

She opens the story with comments about drinking at the Parents' Day school meeting. Then on page 37 she offers her guest a beer saying it's okay because the kids won't be home for a while.

“Wait a sec, let me fetch the coldest ones. I can be pretty choosy. With beer, at least. Always gotta be cold [...] Figure I’m on the road to alcoholism anyway. [...] Let’s see, I been drinking since I was 18, so that makes 10 years plus. Okay, okay, so maybe I’m a little loose with my numbers. But hey, who’s to worry?” (Birnbaum 37). She’s clearly an alcoholic! She’s drunk at the beginning of the story and rambles through the story in an unorganized, drunken manner. Is she too drunk to stand up for herself? Does she keep herself numb for a reason?

15. Taking the speaker’s discussion about childbirth, what might a Feminist reading conclude?

She says, “Labor pains are just like climax with the good part missing. [...] But by then boom! Out comes the baby. Yeah, feels like you just took one enormous crap” (Birnbaum 37). While this is a crude way to speak of childbirth, she later says, “Soon as I saw the baby’s face, I burst into tears. Talk about happy. This is my baby” (Birnbaum 37). She goes into childbirth as a strong, independent person, but comes out of it in complete love with her child. A feminist might say that the baby makes her go soft.

16. What is “a wife’s duty” / “a mother’s duty” / “A daughter-in-law’s duty”? Does she still believe this? Why or why not?

It is a wife’s, mother’s, daughter-in-law’s duty to “do housework, child raising, work, and still have energy to burn” (Birnbaum 38). Now she realizes how selfish this makes her critics. She is miserable and finally recognizes that to be happy she must stand up for herself.

17. Describe the man’s relationship with his parents. What might a feminist critic say about this?

She says, “His mother’s a tough old bird and his father’s impossible too. Like father, like son, right? Yells at the drop of a hat” (Birnbaum 39). He fights with his parents all of the time. She is forced to be the filial one with his parents because the husband can’t do it himself. She is forced into that position, making her the weak one. A feminist would believe that this is the husband’s responsibility. He should be able to speak to his own parents and treat them with respect and kindness.

18. In trying to drum up more work in her English tutoring job, what commentary does she make about housewives? What feminist reading/critique does she offer?

She makes comments on how lousy housewives are, always making a big deal out of little things. She says, “Housewives are housewives. [...] They hand out one measly flyer and it’s a big thing” (Birnbaum 40). A feminist would say that domestication has made women lousy and lazy. They must get out and do things for themselves.

19. What happens to her second child in childbirth? Why might the mother-in-law want to “get rid of” it? What historical precedent is there in Japan for treating a child in this way?

It’s a little unclear what happens to this child, but I don’t think he’s born completely healthy. The mother-in-law says, “Just as well she dies along with that half-formed kid”

(Birnbaum 44). Then she says, “My husband and mother-in-law told me to get rid of the baby” (Birnbaum 45). I believe the child is a little deformed or something, else why would these people want to get rid of the baby? There is definitely precedent in East Asia for choosing the healthiest of children to keep and then getting rid of the unhealthy ones, though I’m certain that does not happen as much anymore. The fact that the mother wants to keep the child makes her a Feminist because she’s sticking up for herself and going against the grain when it comes to motherhood and children.

20. What does Elvis Presley help her to realize?

“Then, suddenly, Elvis’s songs were there, slipping into the hollow places in my heart. [...] I liked Elvis before, but never realized how great he was. With his singing, he shakes a person to the bottom of their soul. [...] You’d think, this is the only person in the whole world really living. He’s so full of life” (Birnbaum 46). He makes her realize that for so long she’s been overlooking herself and not letting herself feel or live life to the fullest. She realizes how “lonesome” she’s been.

21. Discuss the imagery of birth and rebirth throughout this story. How does this imagery play into a Feminist critique?

She has trouble giving birth to her child. She has trouble being reborn herself. For so long, she’s suppressed and forced into the role of a wife, mother, daughter-in-law. But with the discovery of Elvis, she realizes that she needs to live for herself. How much more Feminist can one get than to be “reborn” in a story?

22. By the end of the story, has she really changed (through Elvis, through finally standing up for herself, etc.)?

I believe she is reborn, but also falls back on old comforts (such as drinking). She now stands up to her mother-in-law and husband, but continues to numb out with beer and allow herself to become irritated with her son. Before discovering herself anew, she probably would have done whatever made her family happy instead of focusing on herself. At least now she’s not afraid to sleep through dinner, make her husband do the dishes, complain back to her son, or be herself. She has changed, but not completely for the better (Birnbaum 48).

23. Explain the “sproing” sound and what it means to the story. What is that moment’s significance?

“Sproing! The strings of fate just snapped” (Birnbaum 47). This occurs after she is reborn and snaps on her mother-in-law and husband. There is no turning back. All of the tension has been building in her life and she finally snaps (sproing!). She lets loose. This is the moment of climax for her in realizing that she must live her life a different way to be happy.

Activities

Students will...

- examine and develop Feminist criticism in the work
- identify traditional Japanese literary techniques in the work
- identify modern Japanese literary techniques in the work
- interpret the historical significance of the rise of Japanese women in society

NOTE: This lesson would fall in the middle of a unit on Literary Criticism / Literary Theory. I cover the following theories in my unit:

- New Criticism/Formalism – where works have just one meaning
- Reader Response – where works have infinite meanings
- Feminist – where analysis of female characters (or lack of) and their actions are important
- Historical/Biographical – where time period and author background influence meaning
- Psychoanalytic – where a close reading of the characters’ psyches is important
- Multicultural – where an understanding of the “other” in the story is important

With “Sproing!”, students will be using Feminist Theory. The tenets of a Feminist Critique include the following:

- Examines themes and styles in female writing / female characters
- Analyzes stereotypes opposed by men
- Analyzes language as a social construct by men
- Studies misogyny in culture
- Inferiority in literature and society
- Goal is to cause all people to become aware of the seemingly “natural” way gender is viewed

Lesson Plan

1. Students read “Sproing!” for homework last night. ¹
2. Explain to students that not all of the texts we encounter in everyday life are literary. “Cultural” texts can include music videos, television ads or programs, print ads, billboards, or films. I have cut out several magazine ads and iconic photos and pasted them to index cards (See Appendix A).
3. In groups of three or four, students will use the photo on the index card and the questions to generate a discussion about how a Feminist critique might affect or increase their understanding of the image/time period/advertising goal (This could also work well if groups are given two photos with two very different images to contrast.)
4. Questions to answer about picture on the index card:
 - a) Describe the popular cultural text.

¹ Parts of the following lesson are adapted from Appleman, Deborah, Richard Beach, Susan Hynds, and Jeffrey Wilhelm. “Teaching Literature.” *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. Routledge Press, 2004. Web. 12 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.teachingliterature.org/teachingliterature/chapter10/activities.htm>>.

- b) Analyze that text through the critical lens of Feminism.
 - c) Conclude what the significance of the text is and why it is important to read it critically.
5. Each group will briefly present their findings (could project images onto screen, or use overhead projector).
- Discuss as a class the following:
- a. What do your texts have in common? How are they different?
 - b. Now share your analyses. How did you employ the Feminist lens?
 - c. List some of the more “profound” conclusions that resulted from your analyses of these cultural texts.
 - d. Can we use critical lenses to read the world? Explain.
6. Changing Gears – Explain that our Western and Modern vision of what Feminism is/should be has developed over time and regionally. Now lead the class through a brief history of women in Japan beginning in ancient times. Begin with notes on *kakimami* (I find Andra Alvis’s notes on this from the NCTA East Asian Literature Conference work best for this).
7. Begin with the PPT “The Conventions of Courtly Love” paying particular attention to “*kakimami*” or the traditional Japanese version of courtly love. Have students engage with several examples from the NCTA conference, including:
- Man’yōshū* (Japan reader 7-11)
 - Kokin wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry* (Japan reader 12-14)
 - The Pillow Book* (Japan reader 33-42)
8. In groups, have students engage with one of the excerpts above. Have student groups answer the following questions, keeping in mind what they know about *kakimami* and modern Feminism:
- a. How does *kakimami* appear in this excerpt? Which of the “tenets” outlined in the PPT are played out in this excerpt? (ex: poetic exchanges, clandestine visits, seeing a lover in a dream, etc.)
 - b. Summarize what you think it means to apply a feminist lens to a text.
 - c. As a group, underline lines that are particularly relevant to a feminist reading.
 - d. As a group, complete this sentence (more than one meaningful statement might result).
“Based on a feminist reading, we think the poem means _____because_____.”
 - e. What larger questions about society does this reading raise for you?
9. Move students from the ideas of *kakimami* in traditional Japanese literature to the psychological realism of modern Japanese literature. Use Andra Alvis’s PPT presentation on “Psychological Realism in Modern Japanese Literature.”
10. Have students find evidence of psychological realism in “Sproing!” (Use chart in Appendix B.)
11. Now we will look at the reading assignment from last night called “Sproing!” by Eri Makino. Students should have answered the reading questions while they read last night. Today they will engage with the text by noting differences between the ways women were viewed in traditional times versus modern times. (Use chart in Appendix B.)

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Appendix A: Index Card Images (all taken from Google.com)

The tenets of a Feminist Critique include the following:

- Examines themes and styles in female writing / female characters
- Analyzes stereotypes opposed by men
- Analyzes language as a social construct by men
- Studies misogyny in Western culture
- Inferiority in literature and society
- Goal is to cause all people to become aware of the seemingly “natural” way gender is viewed

Questions to answer about picture on the index card:

- a) Describe the popular cultural text.
- b) Analyze that text through the critical lens of Feminism.
- c) Conclude what the significance of the text is and why it is important to read it critically.



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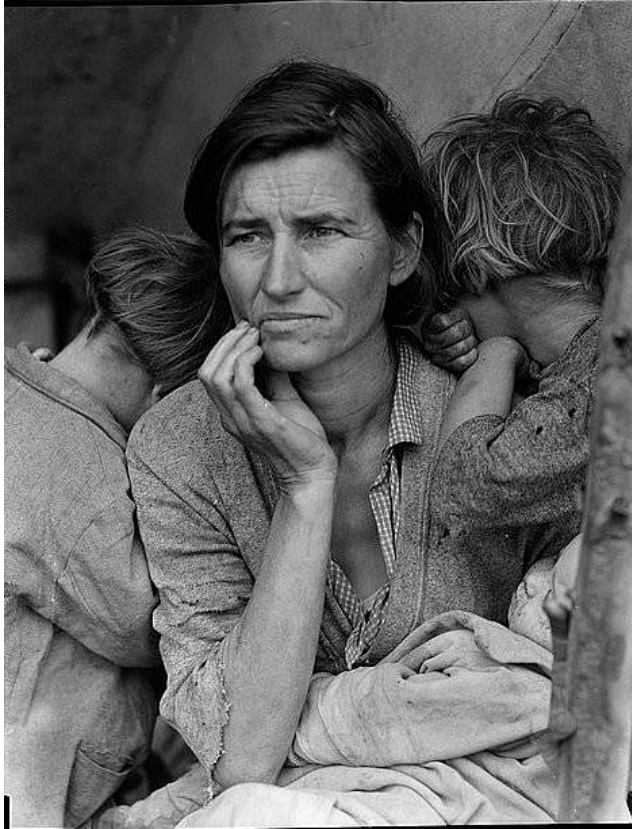
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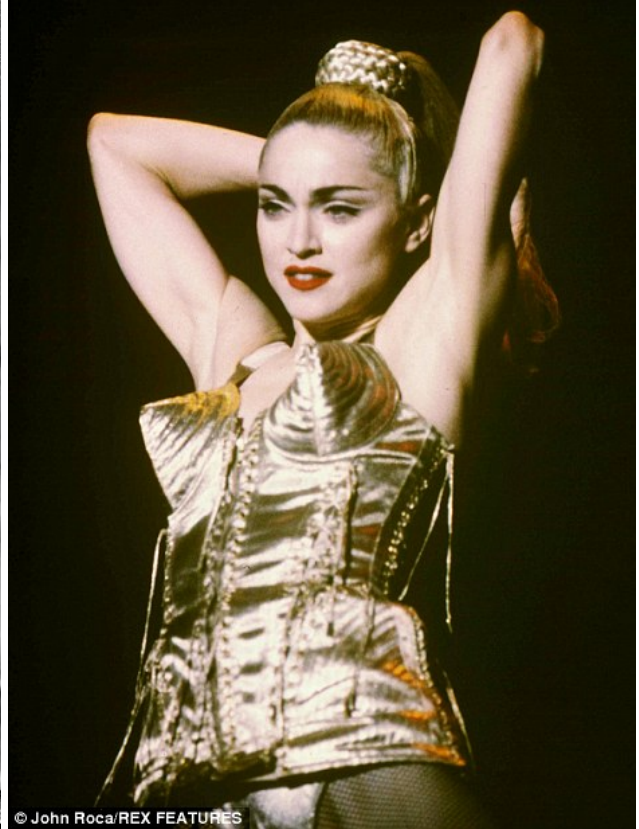
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Appendix B

Please note evidence of the following in Eri Makino's "Sproing!" Provide page numbers and small quotes where applicable.

Kakimami	Psychological Realism
Man catches glimpse of or hears of a woman	Portraying thoughts and feelings without "idealization"
Two exchange poems/letters	Lack of references to the virtuous stereotypes
Two meet, become lovers	Lack of "stylization" in literary style
One part begins to lose interest or disappears	Focus on the author's experience
Other party is left desolate and inconsolable	Taboo mental content
Poetic exchanges	Irrational thought processes
Clandestine visits	Avoidance of fictionalization, prettifying, plot
Motif of seeing lover in a dream	

Theme of passing time	
Theme of mourning for one's wasted youth/beauty	

Now that you've identified traditional and modern elements in "Sproing!", answer the following questions.

1. Does "Sproing!" seem to fit better with the messages of traditional Japan? Or modern Japan?
2. How does the author's background (written in a paragraph at the end of the short story) affect your understanding of the story? Does it change the significance you place on parts of the story, knowing that it could be true? Why or why not?
3. Eri Makino "writes with a frankness and unsentimentality that goes against the weepiness characteristics of older women writers" (Birnbbaum 48). Do you find this is true in "Sproing!"? Where do you see evidence in the text?
4. Birnbbaum says that Makino "looks at the sham of the Japanese male and speaks her mind" (Birnbbaum 48). According to Makino, what is wrong with Japanese males? Find evidence in the story and record it here.
5. Do you feel this is a characteristic specific to Japanese males? Or do you see this happening in other non-Japanese cultures?